2003.14.01 – Nemaha County Historical Society collection (Seneca, KS)

Coal Creek History

COAL CREEK (ST. PATRICK'S PARISH)

In the south central part of Nemaha County lies a small stream beginning winding its way southward, growing larger as its branches through Potawatomi County until finally its system is united with the Kaw River at North Topeka. The early pioneers named this stream "Coal Creek" because coal was found along its banks and by means of the crude hand strip mines this local fuel of bituminous quality was made ready for use by the early settlers. At this time there was an abundance of heavy timber along this creek; however, in the pioneer days, timber was very scarce because of the many destructive prairie fires which not only destroyed all vegetation on the uplands and prairies but also wrought destruction to most of the trees along the creeks and rivers. Wood was not too plentiful and Coal Creek therefore supplied much coal for fuel.

While there were not many pioneers within the territory of Kansas before the Civil War, they steadily increased after Kansas was admitted to the Union in 1861. Anyone who is familiar with the early history of Kansas knows what privations and hardships the early settlers had to contend with. They could get along physically, but spiritually they were in dire need of guidance and help. Realizing the latter need, Father Fogerty came from Junction City, Kansas, and in 1863 offered the first Mass said in the territory. He offered two Masses in 1863: one in the home of Francis Flaherty, which was located on the County line or parallel, just east of Coal Creek. Father Fogerty rode a horse from Junction City, a distance of seventy miles, coming to the territory once every three months. He usually arrived Saturday afternoon or evening before the Sunday on which he was to give good people Holy Mass.

After years, the place of Holy Mass was changed from the Flaherty home to the home of Hughie O'Donnell, a log cabin, which stood one mile north of the Flaherty home and just east of Coal Creek. Father Dumartier of St. Mary's succeeded Father Fogerty about the year 1864. Mass was offered in the O'Donnell home until 1870 when they began having Mass in the Coal Creek School house, which served as a school and church until the year 1879, when the present church was built at the present site. The Coal Creek school which served as the church stood one-half mile south and one and one-fourth miles east of the present Coal Creek Church.

Father Righamann succeeded Father Dumartier. After serving the people for about a year, Father Righamann was succeeded by Father O'Reily, who in turn was succeeded by Father Fitzgerald, both of whom came from Irish Creek once a month. They would come to Onaga

by rail and were met by some of the Coal Creek parishioners who would transport them by means of a team and wagon across the country to the Coal Creek school house which still served as the place of worship.

In the year 1878, Father Hudson came from Blaine once a month to take care of the services. The reason why the pastor of Blaine replaced the pastor of Irish Creek in coming to serve the parishioners of Coal Creek probably was due to better and more satisfactory railroad connections from Blaine. Father Hudson, in 1879, chose the present site for the church. He purchased one acre of land from Timothy Redden who in turn donated one acre for church use. Across the road from the church site, the parish bought two acres of land from Al Becker for a cemetery. Mrs. Reilly, a member of the new parish, was the first to die and hence was the first person to be buried in the new parish cemetery at Coal Creek. She was laid to rest in 1880.

Father Hudson, while still residing in Blaine, began soliciting funds for the new church from the parishioners of Coal Creek, who generously contributed, and in every way possible cooperated with their pastor in the enterprise. The present structure, a wooden building, was completed in the year 1879. Albert Swartz and Anne Cline were the first persons to be married in this new church. Their wedding took place in the year 1882.

Father Sylvester Meehan succeeded Father Hudson in the fall of 1890, and he too, like his predecessor, came from Blaine. Father Meehan built the present parish house in the spring and summer of 1891. He was succeeded by Father Michel in September 1891, who was the first priest to live in the new parish house and the first of a long series of resident pastors of the Coal Creek Parish. While the priests came over from Lillis and Blaine, Mass was had only once each month; but in 1891 Father Michel began residing in the parish, and Mass was had each Sunday. Missions were soon founded at Onaga and Soldier, both of which were attended by the pastor of Coal Creek.

All of the founders in this community at the time of the founding of the parish were of Irish descent. Among them were George and Edward Flaherty, Jimmy Redmond, Wm. Fitzpatrick, Pat Cline, Tom Donahue, Simon Meyers, Pius and Al Becker. There was no colonization but they just drifted in. The majority, it seems, came from Chicago, while others came from Pennsylvania and Virginia. They came as far as Atchison by rail and from there drove by means of ox teams out to their future homes. Some of them had no horses or oxen and walked the seventy miles. The Union Pacific, Central Branch railroad from Atchison west through Nemaha County was built in 1878.

Owing to the fact that all the members of this new parish were either born in Ireland or of Irish descent, it is not surprising that they named the new church after the Patron of Ireland—St. Patrick.

Father Michel served as pastor from September 1891 to August 1892 and was then succeeded by Father Meehan who came back as resident pastor, living in the house that he built 8 years previously. In September of the year 1893, Father John Tully succeeded Father Meehan. After serving the people four months, Father Tully was removed and Father T. J. Beck came from Holton each Sunday and administered to the spiritual needs of the parish until Father Francis L. Connors was appointed pastor in August 1895. After serving two months, Father Connors was succeeded by Father Coolen, who in turn was succeeded by Father Joseph Siker, March 20, 1897. Father Siker remained in Coal Creek until September 1901.

Father Schoenfeld took up the good work where Father Siker stopped, remaining as pastor until September 1906, when he was succeeded by Father R. Geinitz, the only rector who had served Coal Creek up to this time who is still numbered among the living. Father Geinitz, while pastor of Coal Creek, had the distinction of being the first priest of the Leavenworth Diocese to own an automobile, which according to the parishioners was "too powerful" for the roads of the community, which were hilly and poorly kept.

Father F. McIntyre succeeded Father Geinitz in December of 1908. Father J. W. Gormley followed in the footsteps of Father McIntyre, June 1911, and after serving four months Father Lawrence Kramer relieved him. October 1913 marked the beginning of Father Beulau's fourteen-month reign. Father Levitt Jacobs then came to Coal Creek and for two years faithfully served the good parishioners. Father J. J. O'Keefe succeeded Father Jacobs in August 1917. He had a furnace installed in the residence and bought new furnishings for it. Father O'Keefe was succeeded by Father Joseph P. McDonnell in May 1920. Father McDonnell remained as pastor three years and had as his successor Father George Kuglemaier, who came in July 1923. Father McTavish followed Father Kuglemaier in July 1924 and he was succeeded by Father Edward Hauser, July 1925. After one year of faithful service, Father Hauser was succeeded by Father Lawrence Reith, who came in July 1926.

Father Reith established a new parish at Corning, Kansas. Property was purchased in Corning in the fall of 1927 and Father Reith moved from Coal Creek into the house bought for the new parish at Corning. Coal Creek now became a mission of Corning, having Mass each Sunday. The Onaga Mission was given to Wheaton and the Mission church at Soldier was sold, the parishioners of that mission becoming members of the Corning parish. Father Adalbert Krzyzanowski succeeded Father Reith in November 1930 and remained

until June 15, 1933, when he was succeeded by Father Henry Grosdidier, the present pastor.

The parishioners of Coal Creek have always been noted for the esteem, respect and devotion they always had for their pastor. The former pastors of Coal Creek all speak very highly of the solid faith and piety of the members of the Coal Creek Parish. The parish today, while not having as many members as formerly, has thirty-four families. Last spring the county rocked the road to the church so we now have all-weather roads all the way from Corning to Coal Creek—a distance of nine and one-half miles.

FINIS EST
Coal Creek History
By Rev. Henry Grosdidier
Oct. 24, 1935

Addendum: Notes from Mrs. Wilbur Jeanneret

I'm sorry I am so late with this. I'm sure the history is much too long to use, but I didn't know where to cut it down—you know much more about this than I do. The enclosed history is from the Catholic Archives in Kansas City. The pencil markings were on it when I received it.

In 1927 Coal Creek became a mission of Corning. Sometime after this the parish house was dismantled. I'm not sure of the exact date of the dismantling. The lumber from the parish house was put into the parish hall built in 1951.

In 1940 a storm damaged the bell tower. The tower was rebuilt, placing the bell on a platform on the ground on the north side of the church. Jeremiah Becker donated this bell in 1892 to the Coal Creek parish.

Because I am so late with this perhaps you won't have any left-over space—hope there is enough for at least the picture.

Mrs. Wilbur Jeanneret
Onaga, Kansas 66521

Find enclosed a stamped addressed envelope to return the history to Jo Date.
(Handwritten note: John Becker donated bell 3/9/1892)